Mississippi Public Safety Data Laboratory

TRAFFIC FACT SHEET

April 2014

The State of Texting while Driving

By: Tonya T. Neaves, M. Alan Burns, Bryan Farrell, Tawni Basden, and Robert Hancock

The PROBLEM

Traffic safety continues to be a major issue affecting all Americans. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is charged with the mission to ensure safe operation and movement of roadway motor vehicles in an attempt to reduce both the number and severity of crashes[1]. In addition to making our roads safer and reducing fatalities, these measures save costs in vehicle repairs, time lost from congestion or cleanup, and can result in lower insurance premiums.

Identifying the causes of crashes is the best way to understand how to move forward and try to implement measures to reduce these crashes. There are three major causes commonly associated with traffic safety: 1) The environment and infrastructure, 2) vehicle design/characteristic flaws, and 3) driver errors or misconduct. Distracted driving is encompassed in this third category and is one in which we see a growing problem particularly with our youth drivers[2].

> *"Distracted driving is a national epidemic, and our youngest drivers are particularly at risk."*
>
> *Peggy Conlon*
> *President and CEO, The Ad Council*

Distracted driving is considered any interference with a driver's ability to keep their eyes and mind effectively on the road at all times. There are three criteria necessary for safe operations of a motor vehicle: 1) manual engagement, 2) visual engagement, and 3) cognitive attentiveness. A loss of any one of these constitutes distracted driving[3].

Some risky behaviors that lead to distracted driving are eating or drinking, applying makeup, reading, talking, adjusting the radio, using navigation systems, etc. However, due to the nature of encompassing all the criteria previously mentioned for safe operations of a motor vehicle, texting and driving has been identified as a serious threat to motorists[4]. A single text distracts a driver for 4.6 seconds on average, enough time to cover an entire football field at 55 mph[5].

The STATS

In 2011, there were 29,757 fatal crashes killing 32,367 people in the United States[6]. Approximately 85% of fatal crashes are found within the top 5 contributing behavioral factors. Distracted driving was directly responsible for 3,085 fatalities in 2011[6] (see Table 1).

Cell phone usage while driving accounts for approximately 23% of all traffic-related crashes in the nation[7]. Cell phone usage accounts for 18% of all distracted driving fatalities[8] and 10% of all fatal crashes[6]. More than 800,000 drivers are distracted by the use of a cellular phone while operating a vehicle at any given time[5]. Research shows these drivers are 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash rather than non-texting drivers[5]. That is, 1.6 million crashes per year[7]. Distracted drivers are 8 times more likely to cause a crash texting while driving as compared to intoxicated drivers who are 4 times more likely[1]. Teen drivers aged 15-19 involved in fatal crashes were distracted by the use of a cell phone 21% of the time[9]. This equates to 11 teen deaths everyday due to cellphone distraction[10].

Table 1. Top 5 Contributing Behavioral Risk Factors for Fatal Crashes in the United States for 2011

Behavioral Risk Factors	Number	Percent
Speeding beyond posted limit	9,080	36%
Under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or medication	6,042	24%
Failure to keep in proper lane	4,039	16%
Failure to yield right of way	3,148	12%
Distracted driving	3,085	12%
Total Drivers	25,394	100%

While the state of Mississippi has no comprehensive law against texting and driving, there is a ban for novice drivers and bus drivers with minors as occupants. A 2010 study sponsored by The Center for Mississippi Health Policy found that 75% of adults admitted to talking on the phone while driving, and 33% admitted to reading, writing, or sending text messages while driving[11]. Around 50% (49.3%) of respondents admitted to experiencing negative effects from distracted driving including: drifting into other lanes, disregarding traffic lights, and crashing just to name a few[11] (see Table 2).

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Public PERCEPTION

Public perception may be a key factor in understanding the persistence of the problem. The assessment of the risk associated with a particular action, in this case texting while driving, will often match the everyday practice that accompanies it. According to the 2010 distracted driving study, 65.5% of the 18-24 year old adults and 49.5% of 25-44 year old adults admit to texting while driving[11]. Just as well, 77% of young adults express confidence in being able to text and drive safely[7]. This may reflect a society that identifies texting while driving to be a low risk action; possibly leading to a false perception of safety in our young drivers.

> "Texting and cell phone use behind the wheel significantly increases a driver's risk of crashing. Even a single, momentary distraction while driving can cause a lifetime of devastating consequences. Since 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation has pushed…to help combat the deadly epidemic of distracted driving."
>
> *Anthony Foxx*

Another explanation for the continued prevalence of texting and driving is the fact that today's youth have adopted multi-tasking as a way of life[12]. The technology-driven environment has created the need for a busy, on-the-go lifestyle, which promotes multi-tasking at all times. Cellular phones, in particular, provide an easy and quick means for people to stay "connected" with their friends, family, and colleagues. The social need for multi-tasking and connectivity along with perceptions of texting being a low risk activity leads drivers, especially youth, to accept the risk despite the statistical evidence.

The TAKEAWAY

The adverse effects of texting while driving are clearly present, and while there is no comprehensive legislation on the issue, 84.5% of surveyed Mississippians support it[11]. However, even if legislation is passed, enforcement and an evolution of public perception will be necessary factors in creating safer roadways for all ages.

Table 2. Adverse Effects Experienced by Adult Drivers while Talking, Texting, or Emailing While Driving

Adverse Effects of Experienced	Texting/ Emailing	Talking
Drifted into another lane or off road	37.0%	17.4%
Failed to go when traffic light turned green	29.4%	13.3%
Quickly applied brakes/turned wheel to avoid crash	23.0%	12.1%
Missed a turn or exit	17.0%	16.0%
Been in a car crash or fender bender	2.8%	2.7%

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